

A Short Fight on Hobkirk's Hill: Surprise, Blame, and Defeat

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A map showing the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill, courtesy of the University of South Florida

At 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning of April 25, 1781, one and half miles from Camden, South Carolina, British troops advanced on Continental Army soldiers, commanded by Major General Nathaniel Greene, who were having their breakfast. The Continentals, camped on a low, but "strong and difficult," ridge named [Hobkirk's Hill](#), which extended for about one thousand yards, surrounded by thick woods, and a swamp on the East, were taken by surprise. [1] The British, commanded by [Lord Rawdon](#), had known of Greene's movements, possibly from a deserter, or from Continentals captured

during skirmishes before the battle. [2] Every person in Rawdon's army, including drummers, was armed with a flintlock gun, including 60 dragoons, and in broad daylight, they marched, led by Irish volunteers, through the swamp and woods undetected, and reached the front of Continental lines. [3] What one North Carolina rifleman, named John Mooney, called a "short fight with...Lord Rawdon at Camden" ensued. [4]

General Greene described that the Continental Army was waiting on the hill for reinforcements, since they did not see it as practicable to storm the town. [5] Advanced regiments of his army were fired upon, with a defensive line quickly forming to repulse the British. Numerous sections of the Continental army were told to attack and advance on British flanks and hold back the British. [6] However, two companies in the Second Maryland Regiment became "disordered" and the regiment's commander, Colonel John Gunby, gave an order to take a position in the rear, with other Marylanders following behind. [7] While both of these groups were rallying, the British gained Hobkirk's Hill and turned the American's flank.

During all this commotion, the Continental Army did not fare well. Numerous regiments were thrown into disarray, Captain William Beatty was killed, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Ford was shot in the elbow and gravely wounded, and the battle turned in the favor of the British. [8] Irish volunteers pushed back the Continentals from the hill and the British pursued the army for three miles, despite the attacks of Colonel William Washington on British rear. [9] Still, this battle was not a complete defeat for the Continental Army. After all, the Continental cavalry and infantry, in the evening of April 25, charged upon the British who retreated into Camden, and the Continentals kept their artillery intact. [10]

Once the smoke cleared from the battle, which may have only lasted a mere 15 minutes, the British had succeeded in drawing the Continentals away from Camden but at high price. [11] On the British side, 258 were either killed, wounded or missing. [12]

As for the Continentals, it was a different story. The British Parliament's *Annual Register* declared that by the end of the battle,

"The enemy's killed and wounded were scattered over such an extent of ground, that their loss could not be ascertained; Lord Rawdon thinks that the estimate would be too low if it were rated at five hundred; Greene's account makes it too low...[a] hundred prisoners were taken...a number of their men went to Camden, and claimed protection under the pretence of being deserters." [13]

After the battle, which Sir Henry Clinton claimed as a victory for the British over General Greene, the casualties were not as severe as British estimates claimed. [14] Lord Rawdon buttressed this figure by saying that the number of Continentals killed or wounded was over 400 soldiers, while other estimates put it at 266 casualties. [15] The total number of wounded, killed, or missing of the Continental Army, during the battle was 247, with only 17 of those known to be killed, showing the British were exaggerating in saying that blood was spilled across the battlefield. [16]. The total number of casualties is nowhere near the British estimate. [17] However, if Greene is right, then the British took "200 prisoners and ten or fifteen officers" in the town itself. [18]

In the months after the battle, each army went their own way. General Greene and his forces moved to a location twelve or fourteen miles from Camden, rallying his troops and receiving reinforcements. [19] In May, Rawdon's army abandoned Camden, burning his baggage, stores, and numerous other parts of Camden, leaving the town a "little more than a heap of ruins" as Greene put it. [20]

Greene blamed parts of his army for not giving him victory. He claimed that the Continentals had the advantage but it was squandered. [21] He specifically blamed Colonel Gunby for giving "the enemy the advantage of the day," while admitting that the Marylanders were the "best soldiers in the field." [22] Greene's argument was that Gunby's actions caused the "disorder" and didn't allow the Continentals to defeat the British on the battlefield.

The possible reasons for the American's defeat are numerous. The injuring of Ford and death of Beatty may have thrown their troops into disorder. [23] However, the Continental troops were already on the defensive, surprised by an open attack from the British. The *Annual Register* addressed this directly, saying the defeat was because of British surprise:

"This defeat was attributed by Gen. Greene to the misconduct of a part of the Maryland Regiment. This may be true. But it is plain that his army was surprised. The American discipline...is far from perfect...the facility with which Greene rallied and formed his troops under the circumstances of their surprise...sufficiently shewed him to be a brave and able officer" [24]

Gunby, as some have argued, saved the Continental Army from being routed by the British. [25] No matter who is blamed, there is no doubt that the Americans were outflanked, and that Gunby's move was possibly modeled after a similar move at the [Battle of Cowpens](#) in January 1781, which was successful. [26] Another factor for Gunby's direction could be that his horse was shot from under him, and the retreat of cavalry under Colonel Washington. [27]

The reason the Continental Army did not win at the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill can be continually debated. What is clear is that the Continental Army soldiers could have been "worn out with fatigue" as they were during the [siege of Ninety-Six](#), a month or so after Hobkirk's Hill battle. [28] However, after the battle in April, the Continentals were "in good spirits." [29] In the following months, there was a string of victories in Southern Campaign, including at the Battle of Eutaw Springs in August, when Greene felt his army had "enough strength to again confront the British. [30] By September, the British fleet arrived and began the evacuation of Charleston, another step to the end of the Revolutionary War.

– Burkely Hermann, Maryland Society of the Sons of American Revolution Research Fellow, 2016

Notes

[1] Andrew Augustus Gunby, *Colonel John Gunby of the Maryland Line: Being Some Account of His Contribution to American Liberty* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Company, 1902), 68-69; *The Annual Register or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1781* (London, J. Dodsley, 1782), 81-82.

[2] *Chronicle of America* (Mount Kisco: Chronicle Publications, 1988), 177; *The Annual Register*, 81.

[3] *The Annual Register*, 81-2

[4] Pension of John Mooney, p. 13, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, NARA M804, Record Group 15, Roll 1751, Pension Number R.7,306. Courtesy of Fold3.com.

[5] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 47, Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1776-85. Papers of the Continental Congress. National Archives. NARA M247. Record Group 360. Roll pcc_418178_0001. Item number 155. Courtesy of Fold3.com.

[6] Andrew Augustus Gunby, *Colonel John Gunby of the Maryland Line*, 71; Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 48

[7] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 47-48.

[8] Gunby, 71-72; Steven E. Siry, *Greene: Revolutionary General* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 78; Otho Holland Williams, List of Commissioned and Captured in the Action before Camden April 25th, p. 133, Transcripts of Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1780-82, Vol I, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, Roll pcc_217696_0001. Courtesy of Fold3.com. Other than Ford, three other Maryland officers were wounded.

[9] Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, in the Southern Provinces of North America* (Dublin: Colles, Exshaw, White, H. Whitestone, Burton, Byrne, Moore, Jones, and Dornin, 1787), 480-1; *The Annual Register*, 82

[10] Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781*, 480-1; Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 49-50; *The Annual Register*, 82.

[11] Tarleton, 475.

[12] *The Annual Register*, 83; Tarleton, 481.

[13] *The Annual Register*, 83.

[14] *Report on American Manuscripts in the Royal Institution of Great Britain* Vol. II (Boston: Gregg Press, 1972), 283.

[15] Tarleton, 481; *Chronicle of America*, 177.

[16] Otho Holland Williams, Field Return of Infantry in the Southern Army of the United States Commanded by Major General Greene accounting for the killed in the action of the 25th inst, p. 132, Transcripts of Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1780-82, Vol I, National Archives, Papers of the Continental Congress, NARA M247, Record Group 360, Roll pcc_217696_0001. Courtesy of Fold3.com. It is possible that since the battle was apparently a short affair that the British came to the conclusion noted in the *Annual Register*.

[17] Otho Holland Williams, Return of cavalry and artillery casualties at Hobkirks Hill, p. 163, Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1776-85, Vol. II, National Archives, Papers of the Continental Congress, NARA M247, Record Group 360, Roll pcc_418178_0001. Courtesy of

Fold3.com; Williams, List of Commissioned and Captured in the Action before Camden April 25th, p. 133.

[18] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 49. Later on there was a prisoner exchange by Greene of Camden prisoners (*, 260-262)

[19] Tarleton, 481; *The Annual Register*, 83.

[20] Letter from Thomas Buchanan, June 20, 1781, Intercepted Letters, 1775-81, p. 613, National Archives, Papers of the Continental Congress, NARA M247, Record Group 360, Roll pcc_405131_0001, Item 51. Courtesy of Fold3.com; Tarleton, 483, 488; *The Annual Register*, 83. Rawdon's strategy was strange. Greene's May 14, 1781 letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington shows this to be true, in which he said that: "Lord Rawdon burn the greatest part of his baggage, stores, and...[belongings of] the inhabitants [of Camden]; he set fire...to the prison, mill and several other buildings, and left the town a little better than a heap of ruins: he left behind...people [of his, Rawdon's, army] who had been wounded [at Hobkirk's hill]." This could also be because, as the *Annual Register* said, "...Lord Rawdon's force was far too weak" to attack Greene and defeat him fully (*The Annual Register*, 84)

[21] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, May 5, 1781, p. 51, Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1776-85, Vol. II, National Archives, Papers of the Continental Congress, NARA M247, Record Group 360, Roll pcc_418178_0001, Item 155. Courtesy of Fold3.com.

[22] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, May 5, 1781, p. 51, 53-4.

[23] Ibid, 81-90. Gunby asked for a court of inquiry on the battle, with numerous people looking into the conduct of Col. Gunby during the battle (Gunby, 109). The court declared that Gunby received orders to advance and charge by bayonet with firing...soon after this order two companies on the right of his regiment gave way and Gunby gave Lt. Col. Howard orders to bring off the other four companies to join Col. Gunby at the foot of the hill in order to reorganize (Gunby, 110). The Court of inquiry decided, from certain testimony, that Gunby was active in rallying and forming his troops...and it appears that Gunby's "spirit and activity were unexceptionable" but that his order for the regiment to retire, breaking the line, was improper and not military-like which was "the only cause why we did not obtain a complete victory" (Gunby, 111) Gunby observed the flight of the Second Maryland Regiment and ordered Colonel Greene to take a position in the rear in order to recover the retreat of the two regiments on the field itself (John Marshall. *The Life of George Washington* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1857), 199).

[24] *The Annual Register*, 82-83.

[25] Gunby, 74.

[26] Gunby, 76, 79, 106, 93-94, 99.

[27] Ibid, 94.

[28] Nathaniel Greene to to the President of Congress, June 4, 1781, p. 182-3; Transcripts of Letters from Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene, 1780-82, Vol. I, National Archives, NARA M247, Record Group 360, roll pccc_21796_001, item number 172. Courtesy of fold3.com.

[29] Letter from Nathaniel Greene to Samuel Huntington, April 27, 1781, p. 49. In the same breath, Greene declares that “Captain Beatty of the Maryland Line [was killed], a most excellent officer and ornament to his profession.”

[30] Mark Andrew Tacyn, “‘To The End:’ The First Maryland Regiment and the American Revolution” (PhD Diss., University of Maryland College Park, 1999), 242.

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